

The use of communicative activities in teaching the speaking of English as a foreign language

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the different kinds of activities that are used and that can be used to improve student's speaking skills in English. The focus is mainly on two fundamental factors: practical and psychological. The practical component has to do with the way these activities are organized and put to practice whereas the psychological factor deals with the implications they have on students, that is, to find out which activities motivate them, which ones are less exciting and likely to put students off or how they can be elaborated and make learning fun and interesting. This research was done because in Albania speaking skills are generally overlooked and at best, limited to a small number of communicative activities that are repeated perfunctorily during the whole school year. Teachers and educators need to be aware that there is a wide range of activities that they can use in their classroom for the benefit of all, because students learn better and the teaching process becomes enjoyable and rewarding at the same time.

In order to achieve the goal of this study, I used both the qualitative and quantitative method. The two components of this experimental research were the surveys I conducted with the 9th grade students during the five-week practicum and the observations I did over a one-year period..

The conclusion of this research is that communicative activities promote students' speaking skills and make them competent and able to use these skills in their real-life or work settings. I have included my own perspective and experience both as a teacher and learner of English. The study suggests that teachers should aim at being more courageous and implementing various tasks and activities, keeping in line (however) with the broader objectives and curriculum.

Introduction

There is the general idea in Albania, almost like a collective psyche, that you can learn English, especially spoken English, only by enrolling on a private course. I think this is just a reflection of the deficiencies in the teaching process inherited by the past, as the teaching and learning of English was confined to grammar exercises and reading activities. Thus, teaching oral skills in the Albanian classroom is a real challenge because students have been accustomed and conditioned to teacher-centered styles, and the use of communicative activities has been relatively low. Even in those cases when spoken communicative activities do take place, they are done just for the sake of doing them, just because they are in the syllabus and curriculum, and often detached from their real purpose, which is to produce competent speakers of English and serve them in various domains in their life.

I decided to conduct this study in order to raise some level of consciousness in regard to the wide variety of communicative activities that can be used by English teachers in their classrooms. This research also seeks to shed light on the effects these activities have on the students. For instance, how can a role-play in the form of an interview help them take a successful job interview in real life and make them more confident about using spoken language. Moreover, how can teachers plan and elaborate these activities so as to convey the communicative function and to make them as similar to real-life situations as possible. In addition, my aim is to bring data and facts that show which activities students find most and least effective and enjoyable. To some extent, even other language skills will have some place in this study as they are closely interrelated to speaking.

In times like this, when demands for effective teaching are high and spoken English is an absolute necessity, it is very important for a modern English teacher to invest a considerable amount of energy to the knowledge and successful implementation of spoken communicative activities.

What are communicative activities? Communicative activities are activities that promote spoken interaction between learners which at the same time incorporates the listening component. Some of the most familiar spoken activities include class discussions and debates, speeches and presentations, story retelling, surveys, questionnaires, etc. There are dozens of other activities as well, which can be subdivisions or derivatives of the above-mentioned widespread activities.

One important thing to be noted here is that we are dealing with tasks that should be rough-tuned and appropriated to primary grade students, which in itself is a daunting challenge for teachers. But if it is so difficult for teachers, imagine how nervous and reluctant students would be in trying to get actively involved in these kinds of activities, because acquiring speaking skills is not just a matter of reading, studying and rehearsing but it includes other factors that should be taken into account. If we don't build solid foundations for teaching speaking at earlier ages, that is, in primary grades, it will be very difficult for students to develop communicative competencies at later times, as it has been proven until now. This should start by laying down the speaking problems encountered by students and how can they be tackled. I also think that we as teachers should capitalize on the energy of primary grade students and harness it for producing efficient and fun speaking lessons.

Firstly I will introduce the literature review chapter, in which I will present the theories related to teaching spoken English and what different authors and researchers have said and proposed over

a couple of decades. Examples and details shall have a significant space in this chapter. I will deal particularly with the most used activities and how different authors approach and give suggestions for practical use of these activities in the English classroom. There will be comparisons between various kinds of activities and tasks.

The second chapter deals with the methods used in conducting this research and it includes observations done over a period of one and a half year (they were done once a week with different grades) in a primary school. In addition, this chapter includes details on the use of a questionnaire and survey carried out during the one-month practicum in ‘Naim Frasheri’ primary school.

The third chapter presents my findings on the topic, the results of my questionnaire and survey and their explanations. I will also give my recommendations and suggestions about the planning and execution of communicative speaking activities.

Literature Review

The importance of using communicative speaking activities in the EFL classroom

Outside the classroom, we do not need to perform communicative speaking activities in order to learn a foreign language but in the classroom setting we need to have them as a point of reference for developing certain spoken language features and patterns that will serve us in our daily life situations. Thus we can say that communicative activities are the means for building speaking skills in a foreign language. Isn't this the primary thing that everyone looks for when learning a language? We do not occasionally say 'He knows English grammar very well' but we do say 'He speaks English very well'. Of course, grammar, listening, reading, writing and other skills and factors are important but developing the speaking competence is the ultimate goal for almost everyone learning a foreign language. Since there is a policy towards student-centered teaching, this demands that teachers should use and design a wide variety of speaking tasks and not to keep speaking themselves all the time and have students only nod their head mechanically

Types of communicative speaking activities

There is a wide variety of activities used to promote speaking but we will deal first with those that are more familiar in the EFL.

In the usual, day-to-day classroom the teacher starts the lesson with a warm-up activity in order to ignite the class engine, so to speak. In whatever type of lesson, be it a speaking or reading

lesson, there must be an opener. Let's assume that the topic is 'My birthplace' and its objective is to make students produce a high level of speaking by using adjectives and more complicated sentence structures. The opening activity will include simple phrases such as 'I was born in Elbasan', 'My city is big', etc. In such an activity, Holmes (2003) suggests that the teacher starts by giving a short introduction about his own birthplace. Then students give their own versions. In order to not make it boring, an extension of this would be the 'Remembering Introductions' activity in which three or four students are brought in front of the class and report what the first student says. For example, the first one says:

'My name is Isabelle. My father is French and my mother is English'. The second one will have to say 'Her name is Isabelle. Her father is French and her mother is English', and so on and so forth. This activity can also be accomplished by asking students beforehand to bring some plastic cups and a thread in the classroom so as to form a telephone line, a game which children are familiar of. The purpose of such an activity is to make students able to report in English as well as skilled at identifying and using appropriate tenses by switching quickly from the present tense to the past. The activity can cause laughter among students and the teacher should use it to motivate the students but at the same time to put some limitations as to not disrupt the lesson.

Find someone who...

"Find someone who" is a very interesting and enjoyable activity. What students basically do here is that they have a list of characteristics, such as 'someone who has taken a photo with a snake', 'someone who can swim', 'someone who can drive', etc and they have to move around the class and find a person who meets a certain characteristic and write his name down on the piece of

paper. This is a very good ice-break activity because it helps students get to know one another and promote small discussions about personal information that should be fairly easy for them to retrieve. The teacher should give some rewards to students so as to keep them motivated. Moreover, their level of confidence increases as they get familiar with standing in front of the class and controlling it themselves.

As a follow-up to this activity, the teacher can ask students to introduce the individuals they have met and share what they have learned about each other.

For lower grades, i.e. for children, the teacher can implement the 'Hangman' activity, by giving a word to a student and asking him to not tell it to other children. The word should be an easy one, say *bicycle*, and the student should tell other students how many letters it contains and then give hints for individual letters. For instance, "*it has pages in it and we read it*" which implies that the word is *book*. Holmes (2003) recommends letting students choose the word themselves, as this is the age of student-centered learning.

Another warm-up activity is the three picture story (Ur & Wright, 1992) in which the teacher selects and attaches three large pictures and asks students to do a little commenting about the first picture and encourage them to give their own ideas. As their ideas offer a variety of storylines, the teacher should retell the story from the beginning. Since this activity is a five-minute activity, the teacher presents the other two pictures and asks students to give their own suggestions for the conclusion of the story. Then the teacher gives the correct version, if the students did not guess it. While this is an activity with a limited time, it is very interesting because it ignites students' imagination and whether they find out the true story or not is of little

importance, as the real purpose of the activity is to push students to produce spontaneous, on-the-spot spoken language.

Role-Plays

To some, role-play may seem like a fake activity but it can be of great benefit to students because it prepares them for real-life situations. In terms of language acquisition, role-play can serve as an enhancer of oral fluency and to absorb or assimilate certain language structures used in specific real-life encounters.

Nunan (1991) says that learning to speak in a second or foreign language will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate and thus role-play activities can serve them as a basis for making such attempts. If there is a clear purpose on what they will achieve, they students may be more willing to participate (Nunan, 2004). According to Jeremy Harmer (2001) simulation and role-play can be used to achieve general speaking skills or to train and prepare students for specific situations. One example of a role-play activity can be a television show, in which there is a debate about the environment issues that the country faces. Such an activity can be wholly scripted and the students memorize it or refer to it continuously but it can also be improvised. Actually there is no great difficulty in relation to what the students will say, as they already know facts about the environment but the problem remains with the language being spoken, that is, with the way they will say it. In this respect, the scripted role-play activity has a clearer advantage as it has a pre-set structure and language pattern, which is an important part of the communicative competence. Role-plays are often better than discussions in that they provide a designed framework, i.e, students know what they are going to say. Many

role-plays have an activation rationale (Nunan 2004), which means that students get to use language in a creative way and they have much more control.

Role-plays are great for group works, especially when used in forms of meetings, parties, protests, etc, but they can also be used for pair work activities, often with the aid of cards. For example, the teacher assigns one student as a shop assistant and the other as a customer who has some questions to ask about a product. He is asking for a type of mobile phone that is not available in the shop. How can the shop assistant convince him to buy another type of mobile phone? A useful hint for the students in this or other similar cases would be the use of wh-questions. For example the ‘customer’ student can ask questions ‘What is the product?’, ‘How can I use it?’ ‘Why should I buy this one’, ‘How does it serve me?’ etc. On the other hand, the ‘shop assistant’ student, other than enhancing his communicative competence, finds the activity helpful for developing persuasion skills.

The teacher can also encourage the use of the plays, which would consist in students compiling their own script by using their imagination or they could find pieces from the literature. Speaking activities containing a drama element provide a useful springboard for real-life language use (Thornbury, 2005)

Discussion activities

Discussion is considered as one of the most effective ways of enabling English students to practice talking freely. In order for a discussion to be successful it should involve all the class. While there are some limitations in regard to the number of students who will be given some space to talk, listening can be done by all the class simultaneously (Ur, 1981). Scott Thornbury

(2005) suggests that the best discussions in class are those that arise spontaneously. He goes on to give an example of two girls involved in a conversation in Catalan and because he did not get attention from them, he asked them to share it with other students. What they were talking was about a girl who kept telling lies about different people and then the class made some questions, comments, and suggestions for the next twenty minutes.

These are rare cases and an English teacher should not ‘wait till the cows come home’ for similar opportunities but he should prepare some tasks and techniques for designing classroom discussions.

One such task is the preparation of discussion cards beforehand. The teacher divides the class in groups and gives each group a card which contains some statements about a particular topic. For example, let’s say the topic is about sports. The statements to be discussed in regard to this topic may be:

- Sport has a positive impact in our society.
- Sport can help us lose weight.
- Football is the most popular sport in our country
- Sport boosts self-esteem and helps us achieve goals
- Practicing sport can help us reduce stress

Thornbury (2005), as an alternative to this activity suggests that these discussion points or statements can be converted to questions, such as:

- How can sport help us lose weight?
- How many hours a week do you practice sports?
- Can sports make us feel more self-confident?

- Why do you think football is the most popular sport in our country?

Actually, the use of questions for such an activity can trigger more involvement on the part of students because it pushes them to give an answer. If we take one of the above statements, for example, that practicing sports can help us reduce stress, the student may read and say 'Ok, fine' but if he is asked on how can sports reduce stress, he will be prompted to produce spoken language, even if it is just his opinion.

An additional way to stimulate is to ask students to modify a list of statements about a certain topic, say on the topic 'smoking should be banned'. The class is divided in groups and the statements should be modified so that all the members agree (Gower, Phillips and Walters, 2005).

Panel discussions, which are an imitation of debates we see in television shows, are good activities because they provide some level of autonomy for students. There are a couple of ways this type of activity can be organized. One way is to divide the class in two rows, with the teacher assigning the topic and which view each row should defend. For example, one row is to defend the death penalty and the other is for the abolition of death penalty. The teacher can act as the presenter. Another way is to have students form pairs and discuss their arguments beforehand, then each pair takes their place on the panel and other students, who can act as the audience or as journalists, may ask their own questions.

Another derivative is the pyramid discussion. Pyramid discussions are tasks that work better with problem-based discussions or that involve the selection and organization of items, such as 'What are the most useful and needed things to take with you on a picnic?' Scrivener (2005) gives five steps for the application of a pyramid discussion:

1. Teacher presents the problem by giving handouts to students
2. Ask learners to think about the possible solutions to problems
3. Teacher organizes students in pairs, who will discuss and make an agreement about the solution
4. Then two pairs join each other to form groups of four. This encourages the diversity of thoughts between pairs, although they still need to make a further agreement together
5. Better still, the teacher asks each four to join another group of four
6. When all the groups are blended together in one, ask them to reach a one class solution or agreement

To make students more confident and willing to produce spoken language in a discussion, Harmer (2001) suggests that the ‘buzz group’ should be used by the teacher, which means that the teacher divides the class into small groups for quick discussions, in order to generate content and confidence for the whole-class discussion.

Another activity for pushing students to produce fluent and spontaneous language is the ‘instant comment’ activity, in which the teacher has prepared a list of topics and asks students to give their opinion or information quickly on each topic. Each topic should take up two to three minutes.

Some useful expressions that can be used for discussion are:

Personally, I think...

If you ask me,...

I totally agree.

That's partly true

On the contrary,...

It is important that the people involved in the discussion or debate have enough time to practice what they want to say. The challenge for the teacher is to not influence the discussion, instead students should be the ones to influence the debate.

Picture discussion

A very popular speaking activity is also picture discussion. Teachers in Albania have started to practice it frequently. The teacher brings pictures in the classroom or makes use of the pictures displayed in the textbook. Take for example three pictures which show an apartment in a noisy and crowded neighborhood, a private two-storey house in the city suburbs and a thatched cottage in a village. The teacher asks students in which of the three places they would like to live. If they say they wouldn't like to live in a village, the teacher can ask them why it is so. What would they do if visited it just for one day. What about living in a crowded neighborhood? What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in such a place?

A variation is an activity which includes some pictures in which someone is doing something and the teacher asks students 'What do you think is happening here?' and students then give their own ideas. The teacher then gives the correct version.

This activity is often accompanied with the use of present and present continuous tense, especially when in the picture there are people who are doing something.

The prepared talk

One of the most used activities in teaching speaking (even at the university level) is the prepared talk. What basically happens here is that the teacher asks the student to prepare a topic of his own choice, with the recommendation of choosing a familiar topic for the whole class. The style of the talk is formal, usually including expressions that introduce arguments, opinions or for disagreeing about a certain topic. In addition, students may use transitional words or phrases to make their talk more structured. The teacher should encourage students to write down notes so to make the talk interactive. For example, if the student were to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of using social media, he should ask other students about their own experiences and opinions. A common mistake in this type of activity is that students read convert it to a reading activity. While it is true that it involves some writing, the teacher should draw attention so as to not allow students to read their whole text. It would be meaningless.

A distinguishing element in the prepared talk should be the use and development of original ideas (Harmer, 2001).

Surveys and questionnaires

To get students to have a conversation in English, a good idea would be to conduct surveys and questionnaires. Even better, the teacher can ask them to create the questionnaires themselves and go around the class questioning other students and noting down information. Or they could hand

out prepared questionnaires that are easy to be responded. For example, a typical questionnaire for primary grade students would be on the topic of school system in your country. Some points or questions would be:

- Are you satisfied with the school system in your country? Yes No
- Are textbooks loaded with too much information? Yes No
- What things need improvement in your school? Why?

This is considered a good questionnaire because it has closed and opened questions and it is not boring for students. On the contrary, they are interesting because they uncover the opinions of the whole class. Students can design questionnaires about any topic: environment pollution, music, politics, health, feelings, languages, etc.

The teacher should not remain passive but he should circulate to give suggestions and write reviews. While this is a motivating and encouraging activity, things should not be left to casualty but the teacher should organize the class and give accurate directions so as not to have a disordered class when students move around.

Describe and draw

Describe and draw, which is considered as an ideal speaking activity, is suitable for a group work class (Harmer, 2007). The procedure is as follows:

The teacher divides the class in groups of four to five students. It is like a competitive activity. Each group has to compile a detailed description of something they think will be difficult for other groups to find. It may be an object, a person, a story or anything that can be drawn in the

board. Other than assigning the tasks, the teacher should remain silent in this activity and should act more as an observer. Suppose the target object is Eiffel Tower. A possible description from the group would be: a tall iron structure, located in a European capital, a widely visited place, it has an arch on the lower part. It is 324 meters tall. It has stairs and an elevator as well as restaurants.

One student from the describing group makes the description and one from the other group tries to discover the described object by drawing it in the board. The first group should be vague in description, e.g, if they were to say ‘a tower located in the capital of France’ it would be easier for the other group to figure it out.

This activity is effective because it promotes the enrichment and enlargement of student’s vocabulary, especially adjectives and at the same time it makes use of their imagination.

After such lively activities, students tend to comment each other in their own language. The teacher can take advantage of this enthusiasm and ask individual students to give feedback to other groups. The comments may be in relation to language use or in regard to student’s creativity.

Interviews

The use of interviews in the foreign language classroom is successful because they include a variety of topics or subjects. A usual and very useful interview is the job interview activity, an interview on a personal experience that resembles those which are done in television and many

other areas of interviews. Klippel (1984) says that prior to initiating an interview, the teacher should make sure that the students can use the necessary question-and-answer structures.

Some phrases to be used include:

- Did you mean that...?
- Did you say...?
- But you said earlier that...
- Well, let me see... (which is used for hesitation)
- Hold on a minute

An extension of this activity would involve the 'interviewee' student reporting on the interview he did and other students asking him some questions. Since it is a report-back activity, the interviewee has to use reported speech.

Information gap

In order for communication to be realistic and authentic, it is important that one person has information that the other person does not have. Therefore, you have an information gap.

To find out the missing information, the students need particular language. This language can be pre-told by the teacher. Once the students have this useful language, they can question each other and find the information

To make any information gap activity successful, it is imperative that your partner does not see what's in your picture, for example, because if they do, there would be no information gap. If you have an information gap, then you have the makings of a real conversation.

An example of an information gap activity is an activity in which student A shares information about his family and then student B draws his family tree, and vice-versa.

Another example would be of two students planning to go to the cinema. One student has got some information about the film but his information is not complete. He can ask the partner to find the missing information. Then they discuss together which films they are going to see and they choose the film to go and see together. They discuss and decide about the time to see it, the price, the genre of the film, etc. This is a good activity because it forces students to come to an agreement and share their thoughts. Some useful phrases are:

- What do you think...?
- How about...?
- That sounds interesting.
- I see
- Sure. We can...

Storytelling

In order to develop students' speaking skills through a story, it is required that the teacher does not spend too long in teaching the words or the lesson will become a vocabulary lesson, not a speaking lesson.

The teacher gives them the first part of the story and he asks them in groups to work together to predict what happens next in the story. Another way of exploiting a story for fluency is to give

each student in the group a picture, and then working together as a group, they decide the order in which the story happens before they hear the official story from the teacher. While they are discussing it among themselves, they are actually getting more practice in speaking English.

Then the whole story can be retold within the groups. The teacher can check whether they've got the story right, whether they are expressing their ideas fluently enough.

Communication games

Games provide a high level of excitement for students and at the same time they can be used to develop or improve productive speaking skills.

There are many games that can be implemented for a speaking lesson. One game activity is 'Twenty questions'. The point is in finding out the hidden object. The teacher divides the class in groups and assigns one chairperson and tells to other members of the group that the object is either an animal, vegetable or animal (Harmer, 2001). By using yes/no questions they try to guess the right word by not exceeding more than twenty questions, otherwise they do not get the point.

Another game, labeled as 'Call my Bluff', is a very interesting activity in which the teacher divides the class in two groups. The teacher gives group A a certain word and asks them to find and copy one correct definition of that word from the dictionary and make up other two false definitions. Group B then should find out the correct one. Then groups take turns, with group B now writing their own definitions and group A guessing it. If the teacher and students want to prolong it, they can use other words with the same procedure.

Methodology

In this chapter is given a description of the research methodology conducted for this study. It includes the tools used to collect information and data, where was the study conducted and for how long, how many students participated, their characteristics and what type of approach was used.

The research is divided in two phases. The first phase includes observations done over a one-year period, attending four classes a week whereas the second phase includes questionnaires conducted during my teaching practicum.

The observations were done in an elementary school in the suburbs of Elbasan, named “Jorgji Dilo” school. The questionnaires were carried out also in an elementary school, near the center of Elbasan, and the name of the school is “Naim Frasheri”.

The information and data collected in this research has equipped me with a broader knowledge and perspective, especially about the teaching of speaking in Albania.

The approach of the research is quantitative as there were around 90 students involved as well as qualitative because I give importance to the level of students since there were some wide gaps between classes and students.

In the observations, I have used notebooks and observation sheets (see appendix C) to record the types of activities used, how they were taught and put into practice, what went well and what went wrong, what could be improved. These are presented in the form of comments, suggestions and reflections, also taking into consideration lesson content and objectives.

In regard to questionnaires, I conducted them with four 9th grade classes, which I printed and handed out to them. Class A was comprised of 35 students, class B consisted of 20 students, class C had 17 students and class D 22 students. In total they make 94 copies of the questionnaire, which was the same for all students. We did not have the possibility of including and testing other grades because we were assigned to teach only the 9th graders. I did not divide students to low, intermediate and advanced level because my study is oriented toward a whole-class teaching and learning.

The questionnaire included 10 questions, of which one was an open question for students to give their own opinion or suggestion (see appendix A). This was intended as a measure for evaluating how genuine and sincere the responses would be.

The time of the questionnaire was 10 minutes. Prior to handing out the papers, I explained that the questionnaire was about communicative speaking activities in English and gave a few examples. I also clarified the difference between such types of activities and other communicative activities which had at their core the development of reading, writing or listening.

The name of the student was not necessary to be written in the paper. I asked them to give their own answer and not communicate with other students and to remain quiet during the questionnaire time.

The overall results of the questionnaire are given in appendix B.

Findings and Discussions

This chapter deals with the results of my research, by presenting, analyzing and interpreting the data and information gathered in the questionnaire and observations. I will firstly present some practices and problems in Albania, with regard to communicative speaking activities.

Then I will give some pre-requisites teachers should be aware of, before putting these activities into practice. After that, I will discuss the main psychological factors related to spoken language

Communicative speaking activities in Albania

It goes without saying that before the 90s the practice of English language teaching in Albania involved only the use of the grammar-translation method, and if there was any speaking activity at all, it was just a mechanical reproduction of what was learned through that method.

Although nowadays there are other conditions and demands, not too much has been done on incorporating a wide variety of communicative speaking activities or on promoting speaking in general. This means that we still have teacher-centered English lessons, in which there is very little room for the student to practice speaking, as teachers keep talking almost all the time, often unnecessarily and repeating themselves. That may be a sign of wanting to give the idea that they know how to speak English or for showing that they are the boss in the classroom.

In rural areas there is an emphasis only on reading and there is very little or no speaking practice whereas in urban areas, particularly in bigger cities, there are some teachers who have begun to integrate speaking activities in their classrooms. However, the most noted activities are picture discussions and storytelling (or retelling, for that matter).

In picture discussion activities, English teachers in Albania tend to ask only two or three students who seem to be more skilled than the rest of the class. In general there are three to four pictures in a speaking lesson and what the teacher does is that he asks two students to describe the pictures, each of them having the task of talking about two pictures. There is no warm-up or introduction from the teacher about the pictures but the activity starts immediately with the majority of teachers giving commands such as “Jona, describe the first picture”, “Mario, go on with the next picture” (There isn’t either a ‘please’ at the end of the request, which may seem insignificant but it has been considered a magic word, proven to be effective in getting others to do something that you require or expect from them).

During my observations in the “Jorgji Dilo” elementary school, I often noticed the teacher not paying attention and after the student had finished the description of the picture/s, he asked the student to continue describing it.

Apart from what is offered in textbooks, teachers do not encourage students to bring additional pictures for a certain topic. If they did, students would become even more interested because they would select those pictures that enable them to speak more comfortably and gather relevant information. Thus, they would come to class more prepared, with much more willingness to contribute and make the lesson more vibrant and interesting.

Storytelling is an activity that is also widely taught by teachers in Albania. It is, in fact, conditioned by the curriculum and the textbooks selected by higher education bodies and the Ministry of Education. During these later years, the English textbook for 9th grades has been 'Click On 3'. The textbook consists of ten units and at the end of each unit there is one episode from Mark Twain's famous novel "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn". Of course, the episodes are a compressed version of the original novel, represented with pictures and short, easy-to-understand sentences or phrases from the characters (see appendix E).

This activity is closely related with reading because simply put, the story should be read before reporting it in speech format. Pictures are a good aid in understanding the situations and the context of the story. In general, this activity in itself is a successful one, as far as English teaching in Albania is concerned. The teachers do a good job in eliciting and explaining new, unfamiliar vocabulary. They give a short introduction about the story in order to provoke his understanding, as it were.

What teachers don't do is that they don't make an extension out of this activity. One idea would be to use it for a role-play. For example, the 'Huckleberry Finn' episodes could be a perfect match for getting students excited to find and wear the almost-similar clothes. Aside from producing spoken language they also develop interpretative skills from this task.

This activity is also effective in saving some time because each episode involves four or five characters. If it got only two characters, it would be impossible for all the students to act it out of the class, which in turn would lead to frustration on the part of students because it would mean their work has been gone in vain, and if it be so, they won't be excited or motivated and won't

spend their energies to clothe and perform their role appropriately the next time a similar activity comes up.

Many teachers claim that they already have converted this activity into a role-play by getting students to read the story out loud in class. Undoubtedly, reading has its own importance, for it forces students to acquire listening skills and improve their pronunciation and intonation but the main function of a role-play is to make students produce spoken words, phrases, structures, patterns which then are activated in their language repertoire (or into the language acquisition device, as Chomsky calls it) and become assimilated.

Another version of storytelling which teachers here don't practice is story completion. It is clearly more difficult, since students have to think and imagine about the resolution or what happens next. On the other hand, they may have an idea but they can't transmit it in spoken language or they may not find the right words to say it. In spite of the fact that story completion is a challenging task, teachers in Albania should start to make use of it, starting with easier ones, in order to train students for further similar activities, and then progressing with more difficult ones.

They could also use interviews. Interviews in our English classes, just like role-plays, are only read directly from the textbook but are not subject to oral work. They would serve students as a framework for real-life situations and circumstances, such as when applying for a job, doing the check-in in the airport or when asking information from a travel agent. In addition, many new emerging jobs in Albania require English speaking skills. Call center jobs, for example, have increased a lot and they require interviewing as well as persuasive skills in order to convince customers.

What about games? The use of communicative games is a distant theory and perspective in Albanian classrooms. I myself, in all my years of learning English and short experience in teaching, don't remember being part or having witnessed a game activity, be it for speaking, reading, writing or grammar functions. Still nowadays, they are seen either as ineffective or as an American thing (taught only in the United States) that would be unnecessary or that simply would not fit in our education system. But how come they are ranked among best education systems in the world?

I think games would add colors to our classroom practices and would motivate students even more, while also serving as a catalyst for social interactions and integrations among students. A simple definition of 'game' is this: an activity that you do for fun that has rules. Another definition is: a particular event in which people take part in a competition.

Two key words from the above definition are 'fun' and 'competition', which means that students enjoy game activities and want to get involved to win. Their ultimate goal is winning the game. Meanwhile, they subconsciously pick up speaking skills and if their experience is positive, those skills will last.

Statistically speaking, female students in Albania have higher results than male students.

Communicative speaking games have the potential for drawing students toward these activities and then integrating them slowly into regular, day-to-day speaking tasks. In addition, they are willing to bring materials or realia in the classroom for putting those game activities into practice.

My Research Findings and Discussion

When I compiled my questionnaire, I wanted to get some empirical data about the practice of communicative speaking activities and other related factors.

Through my questionnaire, I discovered many problems that need to be addressed in order to raise the awareness for better speaking lessons. If we have a higher quality of teaching and learning, we will produce more competent and fluent English speakers.

The results of the questionnaire (see appendix) show that the majority of students like the speaking activities in their classrooms. However, a considerable number of students did not like these activities. There are some reasons behind this. One reason is that the variety of speaking activities presented and taught by teachers is low. Thus, they keep repeating the same types of tasks which then become boring. It is true that in the 9th grade textbook 'Click On 3' there are ten 'Huckleberry Finn' episodes to be exploited for storytelling (or retelling) and role-play activities but it is also true that between this time gap there are other speaking rubrics to be converted into authentic activities.

Another reason is that they are dry, non-dynamic tasks, always following the same procedures and techniques. They don't ignite student's creativity and do not foster class competition.

An additional factor is the lack of games and realia. If used, they would break up the monotony of classroom activities that teachers keep repeating every week. They don't give attention at all to how the students are feeling during these activities. Instead, they should develop a good understanding of their emotions and get to know them better individually.

As we have mentioned earlier, teaching in Albania has remained within the frameworks of teacher-centered styles. English doesn't make an exception in this respect, meaning that if students had more control over speaking tasks, they would like those activities more and would approach them more confidently.

Along with these, an important factor that is overlooked is student's concentration prior to or during the execution of communicative speaking activities. From the observations done, I noticed a great lack of focus, with various classroom distractions. Due to the advancement of technology and the growing number of mobile phones, many students are found using and playing with them during the lesson. On the other hand, there were students chatting and murmuring, causing distractions and hindering the normal course of speaking activities. Thus, classroom management is a pre-requisite for putting not only these kinds of activities but every kind of activity, task or exercise into practice. There must be clear rules and expectations in relation to this.

Moreover, before starting a speaking activity the teacher should ask students to be consciously present, to get focused, or as teachers usually say it "to be in class". It may seem that the student is following or participating in the activity but he is actually involved in some mental activity, maybe about the goal he scored in his last football match or what he will wear in the next party.

One could say, however, why do other students actually like these speaking activities?

The reason is that it pushes them to produce spoken language, regardless of its quality. Since their goal is speaking English, they get a feeling that these activities are helping them reach that goal.

Difficulty of communicative speaking tasks

Students find speaking activities very difficult. Maybe there is no need for research on this.

However, that is a sign that English teacher's attempts in Albanian classrooms for facilitating such activities are relatively low. Firstly, teachers do not plan speaking lessons and tasks in a detailed way. In our observations, we noted the same procedures, the same style and the same volume in almost every lesson plan. They were done very superficially and carelessly or copied verbatim from the teacher's book. In a lesson plan of a picture discussion activity on 'Extreme sports' it was written: "Ask students if they have ever heard of extreme sports shown in the pictures. Ask students to have a quick look at the sports presented there and after doing so, ask students to say what equipment is needed for each sport. That was all that was written (not planned) about that speaking activity.

Besides, they do not encourage proper preparation from the students. For instance, the teacher tells them "Next time you have a group work. The topic is 'cloning'. Be prepared." He did not ask them to find information beforehand, where to focus, how to divide the groups, etc. If students don't get clear directions, the class becomes like a ship without a captain.

Speaking anxiety

Apart from the big difficulties and problems encountered in speech form (in what students say during a speaking activity) there are also some psychological factors which are an obstacle for spoken production. One of them is anxiety.

Speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Albania, which is also proved by students' responses in the questionnaire.

The major part of students admitted being anxious when giving a talk or presentation in front of the class. Theories suggest that when motivation and self-esteem is low and anxiety is high, the students cannot produce spoken language. Hence, students' failure to get involved and participate in communicative speaking activities is often attributed to their low motivation and self-esteem.

Teachers need to recognize and understand the causes of student anxiety which then lead to unsatisfactory results. Even the most experienced speaker has some difficulties every once in a while and it can be noticed easily when they are anxious.

The first thing a teacher should do is to tell students that such feelings are normal. In present classroom practices that are inherited from the past in Albania, especially in activities such as storytelling, the student has to stand up and report to the teacher. This generates student anxiety and causes him to lose fluency and forget words or important information, which in turn will get him stuck and it will eventually cause even more anxiety for him. To make students calmer and

more confident, I believe that it is a good strategy to let them speak seated in their chair. Many teachers consider it a sign of disrespect and lack of authority from the teacher but I think it has nothing to do with it.

Another factor which I mentioned earlier has to do with the level of preparation, particularly for prepared talks and presentations. For students who have higher levels of anxiety, it is better to let them choose the topic on their own. The teacher should also recommend them to make the talk more structured, to list the main points in a piece of paper and have it as a reference. If students bring with them a paper with full written lines, the presentation will look overwhelmingly overloaded and they can't follow or retrace the last point. Therefore, the paper should be used only as a backup strategy. Another good technique is the use of small colored flashcards.

In group work speaking activities, although they are not often used in our classrooms, students' level of anxiety is much lower, as students converse and discuss with their classmates and are 'allowed' to make mistakes.

An important factor for reducing students' anxiety to speak and participate in communicative activities is rough-tuning language production according to students' age, level and capacity. For younger ages, the teacher should require simple sentences and the use of words that have fewer syllables or that are monosyllabic instead of promoting longer words. For example:

- *blame* instead of *criticize*
- *plot* instead of *storyline*
- *get* instead of *receive*
- *old* instead of *ancient*
- *catch* instead of *capture*

This doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher should prompt every possible word that contains fewer syllables because they may be more rarely used or may have connotations that are helpful in conveying the desired messages or information. In this respect, the teacher should have in mind successful outcomes for students, and the chances for success are higher if they are to use simple language. If students have positive experiences, they will retain and will build on them for next upcoming activities. Among the speaking activities that assure such pleasant experiences are role-plays, interviews, group-work activities and communicative games.

Inability to speak confidently is also due to frequent use and interference of students' mother tongue in the English classroom. When they get stuck or lost for words, students turn to Albanian equivalents and then continue speaking in Albanian. To avoid this, the teacher should help them easy, appropriate words in English.

Last but not least, students' anxiety is closely related to teacher's authority and expectations. If a teacher cannot accept a mistake, such as in the case when the student says 'Huck didn't meet *nobody* there' instead of 'Huck didn't find *anyone* there', it means that if they commit it again, they will be in real trouble. Consequently, they will feel more reluctant to speak next time due to increased anxiety and inhibition. It is certainly fine that teachers set high standards. However, they should use appropriate behavior in approaching and addressing their students. In addition, the teacher shouldn't ridicule the student when making mistakes nor should he allow others to do so. Many students report not having attempted to speak again after being laughed at by the teacher or the class. Speaking activities are susceptible to such situations but the teacher should set limits and should manage students' mistakes better.

Correction and feedback on speaking activities

My questionnaire revealed that there is very little feedback from the teachers with regard to communicative speaking activities. They may do occasionally but it has no lasting impact. Thus, we can say that there is critical importance for ongoing, day-to-day feedback in the teaching profession in general and for communicative speaking activities. Without feedback students are in a dead-end, they don't know at what point they are, where they are going and what to do to make improvements. Just as teachers need to be given feedback by the school principal, by the directory of education, by the ministry, so do students. However, feedback on teachers' work is largely institutional, whereas teachers' feedback on students should include some elements of empathy so as to raise their self-esteem.

Some teachers do give feedback to their students but in most cases they stick to old, traditional techniques and practices. 90 % of the respondents in the questionnaire answered that they were being frequently interrupted by the teacher during a speaking activity. They correct the student along the way, for every mistake he makes. Such techniques only hinder the flow of the lesson and cause students to feel frustrated and lose their thoughts. This frustration will lead to ineffective speaking activities. In the modern practices of teaching English as a foreign language, especially in countries that have better education systems, teachers choose to note down student mistakes and once the activity is finished, they tell and list the mistakes, giving the needed corrections as well as recommendations. This enables students to process and create a clearer idea as to which mistakes they should work on.

Very few teachers in Albania take notes during the time students perform a speaking task. They just listen (or seem to) and when the student is finished, they are left with little to say. Thus, it is highly recommended that teachers keep notes not only of grammatical mistakes but they should also keep track of other skills, such as students' interpersonal skills, how they interact with their classmates during role-play or group-work speaking activities, how they cooperate and use persuasive skills. In this way, they avoid forgetting students' mistakes and errors.

It may happen that the student has made lots of mistakes. Then there would be no point in trying to correct all of them, even if the teacher asked the student to record all corrections and accompanying feedback in a notebook. But what should be done?

If it is a prepared talk, a retell, a role-play, that is, an activity which requires prior student preparation at home, the teacher shouldn't do corrections in content but should tell the purpose and the procedure of the activity and ask the student to prepare it again.

While specific corrections aren't necessary some general directions and recommendations would be of benefit to the student. If there are common mistakes, the teacher can write them on the board. In one of the observations, I noticed and wrote down these common student mistakes in my notebook:

- He has visited Rome last month.
- You can give me an information?
- I have been here since two weeks.
- I buy the ticket online.
- The airport was enough big.

The teacher only advised the student to be careful with grammar mistakes. It would have been a good idea if he had asked the students to give the correct form of the above sentences:

- He visited Rome last month
- Can you give me some information?
- I have been here for two months.
- I bought the ticket online.
- The airport was big enough.

This is not done with the intention to put the student down but to get the whole class to understand that accuracy is as important as fluency and meanwhile to encourage classroom participation.

Alternative ways for correcting spoken English

An alternative way for teachers to correct or give feedback during a speaking task is to use their body language (positively) in order to help students along the way. If the student says something or uses a word that he isn't sure is appropriate but which in fact results to be the right one, the teacher can nod his head to give the student the consent to continue speaking, or he could wave his hand in a way that signals continuation.

If the student, for example, says 'I *go* to the cinema yesterday' the teacher can point behind his shoulders to give the idea of something that happened in the past. Then, when the student says it correctly 'I *went* to the cinema yesterday', the teacher thumbs up for approval.

Group work activities offer the possibility for interesting correction techniques. In a group discussion, if each group is comprised of four or five students, the teacher can assign one of them to note down any possible mistakes that the other group members might make.

In a 'Describe and Draw' activity, other students may correct or say what details the student didn't draw or what he drew wrongly.

In a dialogue or interview activity, the teacher can ask two students to perform the speaking task and two other 'monitoring students', each of them tracing and noting down the mistakes of each student and feedback or comments for their fluency and communication skills. Then they take turns to perform the dialogue or interview. This activity is good because it promotes not only spoken language but also students' listening skills.

Conclusion

Speaking is a skill that is necessary to be taught in our schools in order to produce competent speakers. In a foreign language classroom, this can be achieved better with the aid of communicative speaking activities. This research deals with the types of speaking activities, their practice in modern classroom settings as well as with the situation in Albania. It also deals with the main psychological factors related to it and that should be taken into consideration by English teachers. The core idea is that communicative speaking activities are used to promote authentic English speaking experiences and skills that prepare students for real-life situations.

There is a wide range of activities that can be exploited by English teachers in Albania. Some of the most noted ones are role-plays, prepared talks, storytelling, discussions, interviews, ‘describe and draw’ and a variety of communication games. They form the basic framework of communicative speaking activities. In Albania, however, they are confined to the use of storytelling (or retelling) and picture discussions. Teachers don’t use warm-up activities like ‘Find someone who...’, ‘Hangman’ and the three-picture discussion game which are designed to last for five minutes but with the intention to get students involved and produce spontaneous language. Role-plays, group discussions and interviews are considered as a springboard for real-life language use whereas picture discussions, prepared talks and storytelling are used mostly for the acquisition of certain language structures and patterns.

Speaking should not be seen as an exclusive skill of these types of activities, for they make use as well of other language skills. Listening is always directly related to a speaking activity, for if there are no listeners, there is no purpose in conducting it. Reading is particularly needed for role-plays and story-telling whereas writing for prepared talks.

Through my research project, which included a questionnaire and continuous class observations, I wanted to get a better view of the situation in Albania and investigate in the psychological factors that hinder the successful promotion of students' speaking skills.

In general, our education system still suffers from teacher-centered styles and this is also reflected in students' low English level. In urban areas, there are teachers who have made a good progress in incorporating speaking activities and tasks, although they are confined to storytelling and picture discussions. There are very few attempts to put into practice group-work activities and prepared talks.

The most problematic factor in relation to these activities is speaking anxiety. The majority of students don't participate due to their anxiety and low self-esteem. The 'psychological safety' of students is a pre-requisite for successful teaching of spoken English. That is, students need to be told that it is fine to have those feelings or emotions and that making mistakes is part of the learning experience. Apart from this, teachers should let students speak from their seat in order to not generate unwanted, additional anxiety. Moreover, the teacher should require proper and complete content preparation from the student so as to make him more confident for the speaking task.

In the practice of English teaching in Albania, teachers don't consider feedback as an important tool in the teaching of speaking. They think the fact that students produce spoken language is enough, without paying attention to 'what' and 'how'.

It is important that teachers give regular, unbiased and realistic feedback to students so as to make them aware of the aspects and skills to be improved. Meanwhile, they should also praise

and reward students for their efforts and successful language production, as well as personal and interpersonal skills.

I am of the opinion that there should be done more extensive research on the psychological factors that are an integral part of communicative speaking activities.

I also suggest more research on the validity and use of communication games and how they can be applied in our classrooms.

Finally, I would recommend that this research and similar speaking activities be taught and put into practice by teachers of Albanian language in the elementary school.

Appendix A

Questionnaire on speaking activities

Class _IX_

1. Do you like speaking activities in your English classes?

A. Yes

B. No

2. Are speaking activities difficult for you?

A. Yes

B. No

3. Speaking is a....

A. productive skill

B. receptive skill

4. Are you anxious when giving a talk or presentation in front of the class?

A. Yes

B. No

5. Does the teacher frequently interrupt you make a mistake?

A. Yes

B. No

6. Does the teacher give you feedback after a speaking task?

A. Yes

B. No

7. Do you think you have enough group-work speaking activities in your class?

A. Yes

B. No

8. How many times a week do you practice or perform a speaking activity?

A. Once

B. Twice

C. Three times

9. Which is your most favorite speaking activity?

10. Do you have any suggestions or comments in relation to speaking lessons and activities?

If you have, please write your opinion here.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix B

Results of the questionnaire

11. Do you like speaking activities in your English classes?

B. 51 answered 'Yes'

B. 37 answered 'No'

12. Are speaking activities difficult for you?

B. 57 answered 'Yes'

B. 31 answered 'No'

13. Speaking is a....

B. 70 answered 'productive skill'

B. 18 answered 'receptive skill'

14. Are you anxious when giving a talk or presentation in front of the class?

B. 76 answered 'Yes'

B. 12 answered 'No'

15. Does the teacher frequently interrupt you make a mistake?

B. 72 answered 'Yes'

B. 16 answered 'No'

16. Does the teacher give you feedback after a speaking task?

B. 7 answered 'Yes'

B. 81 answered 'No'

17. Do you think you have enough group-work speaking activities in your class?

B. 20 answered 'Yes'

B. 68 answered 'No'

Appendix C

OBSERVATION WORKSHEET

CLASS OBSERVATION

Student Teacher: Erald Kumrija

Date: February 3rd, 2014

Grade: 6th grade

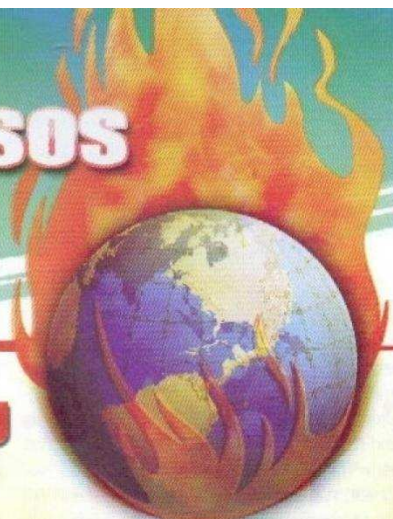
Time: 08:00 – 08:45

DESCRIPTION OF LESSON	COMMENTS/QUESTIONS
<p>The topic of the lesson is ‘Global Warming’. In the book, there are given three pictures, which are related to sea-life, birds and land animals. The focus of the lesson is on speaking. The teacher, after checking home-works, asked the students ‘What is global warming? What do you understand with it? Some students answered ‘Global warming is a rise in the temperature of the earth’.</p> <p>Then the teacher asked them ‘Can you mention some of its effects or possible problems in the future?’</p> <p>Students offered some answers like ‘spread of diseases, air pollution, some species will become extinct, ice is melting, etc.’</p> <p>After that, the teacher divided the class in groups and the topic was ‘How can humans prevent or reduce the problems of global warming’</p>	<p>There was some level of noise in the classroom and a couple of students were not paying attention at all. The home-works were checked perfunctorily.</p> <p>The warm-up questions that the teacher made were effective in getting students involved. However, I think he should also have used facts or examples from Albania.</p> <p>The group-work was a good idea but he should have organized it better, by circulating and giving suggestions.</p> <p>Another thing I would recommend is that there should have been a leader for each group who would direct, gather and present his group’s ideas and thoughts.</p>

UNIT

5a

Earth - SOS



Global Warming

global changes

Global warming is causing major changes in our world. Animals and plants are trying to live with these **changes**. If we do not do anything to stop the **speed** our planet is **heating up**, many of these **species** will become **endangered** or even extinct!

Reading & Speaking

1 Group these words under the subheadings in the text.


seal	bald eagle
elephant	polar bear
cheetah	pigeon
tiger	penguin
sea turtle	wolf
leopard	salmon
elephant seal	

How can global warming affect these animals? Listen and read to find out.

2 Read again and mark the sentences **T** (True), **F** (False) or **DS** (Doesn't Say). Correct the false statements.


- 1 Fish will swim to cooler waters.
- 2 Birds won't have any food.
- 3 There will be more fish.
- 4 Elephants will lose their home.
- 5 Polar bears will have no fur.

Sealife




- Galapagos penguins will not be able to **survive** because the fish they feed on are **moving north** to cooler waters.
- Rising sea levels will **destroy** the places sea turtles **lay** their eggs.

Birds



- Birds that live in **wetlands** will lose their **habitat** as global warming **dries up** their homes.
- As fish won't have food to eat, they will die. So, seabirds that eat fish will die too.
- Deserts are **expanding**. This means birds that migrate long **distances** will be in **danger** as they won't be able to find food **on their way**.

Land Animals



- Elephants will have no place to live because their home will get hot and dry.
- Polar bears will get thinner and may die of **hunger**. Because of the melting ice, they won't have a place to **hunt** or fish to eat.

Appendix E – Huckleberry Finn Episode 1 (Click On 3)

EPISODE 1

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

How It All Started

1 My name's Huckleberry Finn — but everyone just calls me "Huck" — and this is the story of my adventures. It all started with my best friend, Tom Sawyer ...

2 Gold coins, Tom! We're rich!

3 Here you are, boys — a dollar each, every day of your lives!

4 Thank you, Judge Thatcher.

5 You need a *real* home, Huck. I want you to come and live with me like my son.

6 Huck, no one has seen your father for a year ...

7 ... you live in the woods like a wild animal, and don't go to school ...

8 A FEW MONTHS LATER ...

9 Well, Huck — how is life at the widow's?

10 It's hard, Tom! Wearing smart clothes, going to school ... and the widow's sister, Miss Watson, makes lots of rules. I like Jim, though — he's Miss Watson's slave.

11 Jim, I'm scared! My pap has come back!

12 But Huck, everyone says that your father's dead.

13 THAT NIGHT ...

14 Pap!

15 You think you're better than me, don't you? Going to school, sleeping in a fancy bed ... and people say you're rich!

16 Ow! Please, Pap — don't!

17 Well, everyone's wrong, then. See — that mark is from Pap's boot!

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